

ARMIES AND NAVIES

Lecture 12: Phalanx Tactics

Tactics and how to find them

- ▣ The tactics of the hoplites naturally changed according to the enemy faced, ie another hoplite army, a light infantry army, superior forces, etc.
- ▣ The best way to study phalanx tactics is to take the practical approach of studying battles and how armies behaved then.

Marathon, 490 BCE



Persian Cavalry

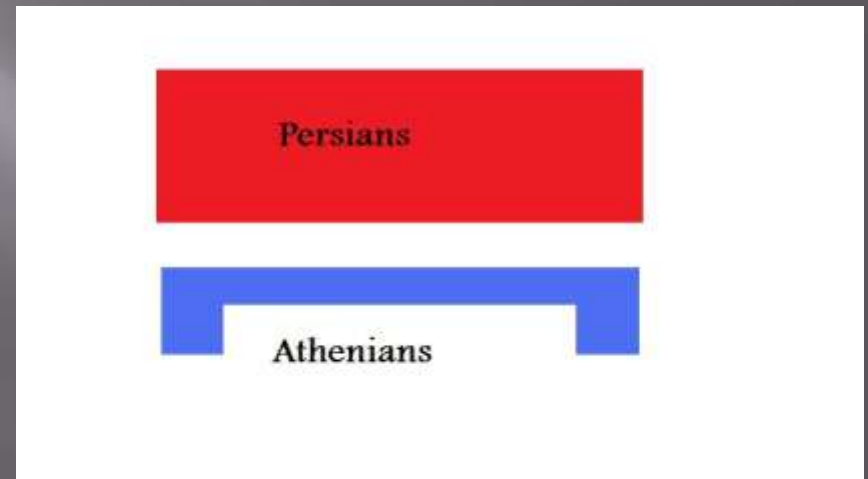
- ▣ Having got Eretria into their power, they stayed a few days and then sailed for the land of Attica, pressing on hard and supposing that the Athenians would do the same as the Eretrians had done. And since Marathon was the most convenient place in Attica for horsemen to act and was also very near to Eretria, therefore Hippias the son of Peisistratos was guiding them thither.
Herodotos 6.102

Miltiades: The Expert

- ▣ This Miltiades then at the time of which we speak had come from the Chersonese and was a general of the Athenians, after escaping death in two forms; for not only did the Phenicians, who had pursued after him as far as Imbros, endeavour earnestly to take him and bring him up to the presence of the king, but also after this, when he had escaped from these and had come to his own native land and seemed to be in safety from that time forth, his opponents, who had laid wait for him there, brought him up before a court and prosecuted him for his despotism in the Chersonese. Having escaped these also, he had then been appointed a general of the Athenians, being elected by the people. Herodotos 6.104

The Athenian Formation

- On this occasion however, when the Athenians were being drawn up at Marathon something of this kind was done:--their army being made equal in length of front to that of the Medes, came to drawn up in the middle with a depth of but few ranks, and here their army was weakest, while each wing was strengthened with numbers. Herodotos 6.111

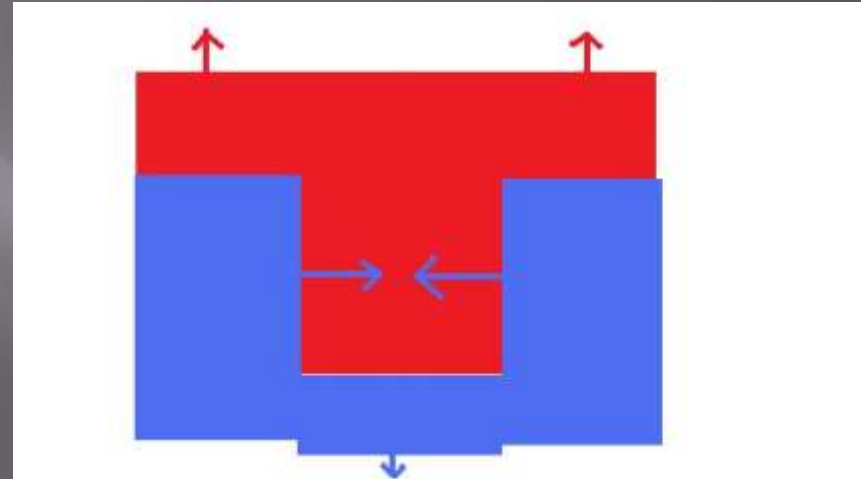


Running at the enemy: A new tactic

- And when they had been arranged in their places and the sacrifices proved favourable, then the Athenians were let go, and **they set forth at a run to attack the Barbarians.** Now the space between the armies was not less than eight furlongs: and the Persians seeing them advancing to the attack at a run, made preparations to receive them; and in their minds they charged the Athenians with madness which must be fatal, seeing that they were few and yet were pressing forwards at a run, having neither cavalry nor archers. Such was the thought of the Barbarians; but the Athenians when all in a body they had joined in combat with the Barbarians, fought in a memorable fashion: for **they were the first of all the Hellenes about whom we know who went to attack the enemy at a run,** and they were the first also who endured to face the Median garments and the men who wore them, whereas up to this time the very name of the Medes was to the Hellenes a terror to hear. Herodotos 6.112

The weak centre

- Now while they fought in Marathon, much time passed by; and in the centre of the army, where the Persians themselves and the Sacans were drawn up, the Barbarians were winning, --here, I say, the Barbarians had broken the ranks of their opponents and were pursuing them inland, but on both wings the Athenians and the Plataians severally were winning the victory; and being victorious they left that part of the Barbarians which had been routed to fly without molestation, and bringing together the two wings they fought with those who had broken their centre, and the Athenians were victorious. Herodotos 6.113



Thermopylae: The Narrow Pass

- As to Artemision first, coming out of the Thracian Sea the space is contracted from great width to that narrow channel which lies between the island of Skiathos and the mainland of Magnesia; and after the strait there follows at once in Eubœa the sea-beach called Artemision, upon which there is a temple of Artemis. Then secondly the passage into Hellas by Trechis is, where it is narrowest, but fifty feet wide: it is not here however that the narrowest part of this whole region lies, but in front of Thermopylai and also behind it, consisting of a single wheel-track only both by Alpenoi, which lies behind Thermopylai and again by the river Phoinix near the town of Anthela **there is no space but a single wheel-track only:** and on the West of Thermopylai there is a mountain which is impassable and precipitous, rising up to a great height and extending towards the range of Oïte, while on the East of the road the sea with swampy pools succeeds at once. Herodotos 7.176



Cavalry and numbers

- ▣ These places then the Hellenes perceived to be such as their purpose required; for they considered everything beforehand and calculated that **the Barbarians would not be able to take advantage either of superior numbers or of cavalry**, and therefore they resolved here to receive the invader of Hellas: and when they were informed that the Persian was in Pieria, they broke up from the Isthmus and set forth for the campaign, some going to Thermopylai by land, and others making for Artemision by sea. Herodotos 7.177

Longer Spears

- ▣ This combat went on throughout the day: [211] and when the Medes were being roughly handled, then these retired from the battle, and the Persians, those namely whom the king called "Immortals," of whom Hydarnes was commander, took their place and came to the attack, supposing that they at least would easily overcome the enemy. When however these also engaged in combat with the Hellenes, they gained no more success than the Median troops but the same as they, seeing that **they were fighting in a place with a narrow passage, using shorter spears than the Hellenes, and not being able to take advantage of their superior numbers.** Herodotos 7.211

Playing with the enemy

- ▣ The Lacedemonians meanwhile were fighting in a memorable fashion, and besides other things of which they made display, being men perfectly skilled in fighting opposed to men who were unskilled, they would turn their backs to the enemy and make a pretence of taking to flight; and the Barbarians, seeing them thus taking a flight, would follow after them with shouting and clashing of arms: then the Lacedemonians, when they were being caught up, turned and faced the Barbarians; and thus turning round they would slay innumerable multitudes of the Persians; and there fell also at these times a few of the Spartans themselves. Herodotos 7.211

Squads, breaks and movement

- ▣ And during these onsets it is said that the king, looking on, three times leapt up from his seat, struck with fear for his army. Thus they contended then: and on the following day the Barbarians strove with no better success; for because the men opposed to them were few in number, they engaged in battle with the expectation that they would be found to be disabled and would not be capable any longer of raising their hands against them in fight. **The Hellenes however were ordered by companies as well as by nations, and they fought successively each in turn, excepting the Phokians, for these were posted upon the mountain to guard the path. Herodotos 7.212**

The other side of the coin

- ▣ The Barbarians accordingly with Xerxes were advancing to the attack; and the Hellenes with Leonidas, feeling that they were going forth to death, now advanced out much further than at first into the broader part of the defile; for when the fence of the wall was being guarded, they on the former days fought retiring before the enemy into the narrow part of the pass; but now they engaged with them outside the narrows, and very many of the Barbarians fell: for behind them the leaders of the divisions with scourges in their hands were striking each man, ever urging them on to the front. Herodotos 7.223

Fighting with swords

- ▣ Now by this time the spears of the greater number of them were broken, so it chanced, in this combat, and they were slaying the Persians with their swords; and in this fighting fell Leonidas, having proved himself a very good man, and others also of the Spartans with him, men of note, of whose names I was informed as of men who had proved themselves worthy, and indeed I was told also the names of all the three hundred. Herodotos 7.224

Plataia: Let's not forget the non-hoplites

- After this the Hellenes were ranged as follows, both those of them who came in continually afterwards and those who had come at the first. The right wing was held by ten thousand Lacedemonians; and of these the five thousand who were Spartans **were attended by thirty-five thousand Helots serving as light-armed troops, seven of them appointed for each man.** To stand next to themselves the Spartans chose the Tegeans, both to do them honour and also because of their valour; and of these there were one thousand five hundred hoplites. ...Last, or if you will first, were ranged the Athenians, occupying the left wing, eight thousand in number, and the commander of them was Aristeides the son of Lysimachos. 29. These all, excepting those who were appointed to attend the Spartans, seven for each man, were hoplites, being in number altogether three myriads eight thousand and seven hundred. This was the whole number of hoplites who were assembled against the Barbarian; **and the number of the light-armed was as follows:--of the Spartan division thirty-five thousand men, reckoning at the rate of seven for each man, and of these every one was equipped for fighting; and the light-armed troops of the rest of the Lacedemonians and of the other Hellenes, being about one for each man,** amounted to thirty-four thousand five hundred. Herodotos 9.28-30

Tactics from the gods

- ▣ This Tisamenos was acting now as diviner for the Hellenes in the Plataian land, being brought by the Spartans. Now to the Hellenes the sacrifices were of good omen if they defended themselves only, but not if they crossed the Asopos and began a battle; 37, and Mardonios too, who was eager to begin a battle, found the sacrifices not favourable to this design, but they were of good omen to him also if he defended himself only; for he too used the Hellenic manner of sacrifice, having as diviner Hegesistratos an Eleian and the most famous of the Telliadai. Herodotos 9.36-7

Other considerations

- Athenians, I lay up these words of mine as a trust to you, charging you to keep them secret and tell them to no one except only to Pausanias, lest ye bring me to ruin: for I should not utter them if I did not care greatly for the general safety of Hellas, seeing that I am a Hellene myself by original descent and I should not wish to see Hellas enslaved instead of free. I say then that Mardonios and his army cannot get the offerings to be according to their mind, for otherwise ye would long ago have fought. **Now however he has resolved to let the offerings alone and to bring on a battle at dawn of day; for, as I conjecture, he fears lest ye should assemble in greater numbers. Therefore prepare yourselves; and if after all Mardonios should put off the battle and not bring it on, stay where ye are and hold out patiently; for they have provisions only for a few days remaining.** And if this way shall have its issue according to your mind, then each one of you ought to remember me also concerning liberation, since I have done for the sake of the Hellenes so hazardous a deed by reason of my zeal for you, desiring to show you the design of Mardonios, in order that the Barbarians may not fall upon you when ye are not as yet expecting them: and I am Alexander the Macedonian. Herodotos 9.44

Cavalry and Hoplites

- ▣ The herald having thus spoken waited for some time, and then, as no one made him any answer, he departed and went back; and having returned he signified to Mardonios that which had happened to him. Mardonios then being greatly rejoiced and elated by his empty victory, sent the cavalry to attack the Hellenes: and when the horsemen had ridden to attack them, they did damage to the whole army of the Hellenes by hurling javelins against them and shooting with bows, being mounted archers and hard therefore to fight against: and they disturbed and choked up the spring Gargaphia, from which the whole army of the Hellenes was drawing its water. Now the Lacedemonians alone were posted near this spring, and it was at some distance from the rest of the Hellenes, according as they chanced to be posted, while the Asopos was near at hand; but when they were kept away from the Asopos, then they used to go backwards and forwards to this spring; for they were not permitted by the horsemen and archers to fetch water from the river. Herodotos 9.49

Another type of warfare

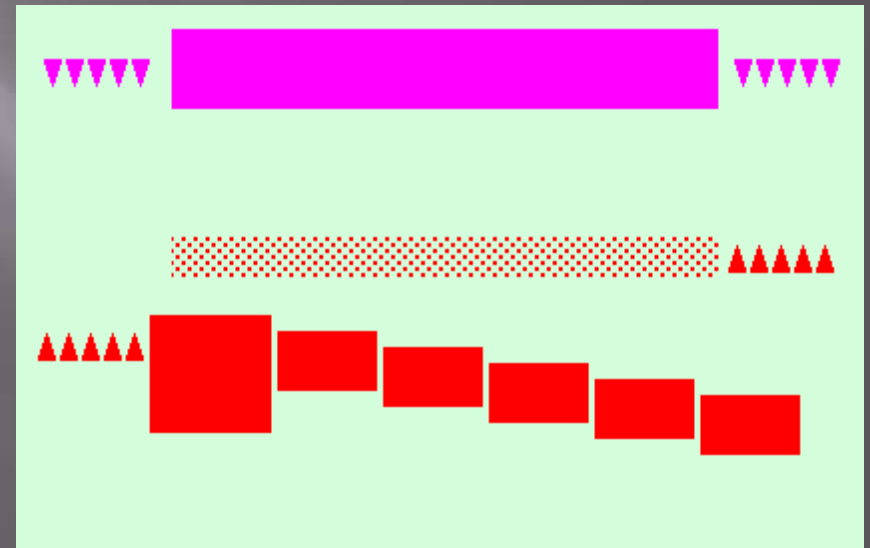
- ▣ So when this at length came to pass, then they also advanced against the Persians; and the Persians put away their bows and came against them. Then first there was fighting about the wicker-work shields, and when these had been overturned, after that the fighting was fierce by the side of the temple of Demeter, and so continued for a long time, until at last they came to justling; for the Barbarians would take hold of the spears and break them off. Now in courage and in strength the Persians were not inferior to the others, but they were without defensive armour, and moreover they were unversed in war and unequal to their opponents in skill; and they would dart out one at a time or in groups of about ten together, some more and some less, and fall upon the Spartans and perish. Herodotos 9.62

Leuktra: A different set of tactics

- ▣ The next move was as a result of the open plain between the two armies---the Lacedaemonians posted their cavalry in front of their squares of infantry, and the Thebans imitated them. Only there was this difference---the Theban horse were in a high state of training and efficiency, thanks to their war with the Orchomenians, and also their war with Thespieae; the Lacedaemonian cavalry was at its very worst just now. The horses were reared and kept by the richest citizens; but whenever the levy was called out, a trooper appeared who took the horse with any sort of arms that might be presented to him, and set off on an expedition at a moment's notice. These troopers, too, were the least able-bodied of the men---just raw recruits simply set astride their horses, and wanting in all soldierly ambition. Such was the cavalry of either antagonist. Xenophon Hellenika 6.4

The Theban Phalanx

- ▣ The heavy infantry of the Lacedaemonians, it is said, advanced by sections three abreast, allowing a total depth to the whole line of not more than twelve. The Thebans were formed in close order of not less than fifty shields deep, calculating that victory over the [Spartan] king's division of his army would involve the easy conquest of the rest.
Xenophon Hellenika 6.4.6



The Spartan Reaction

- In the battle, Epaminondas, bending his phalanx to the left, that, as much as possible, he might divide the right wing, composed of Spartans, from the other Greeks, and distress Cleombrotus, by a fierce charge in column on that wing, the enemies perceived the design, and began to change their order, to open and extend their right wing, and, as they far exceeded him in number, to encompass Epaminondas. But Pelopidas with the three hundred came rapidly up, before Cleombrotus could extend his line, and close up his divisions, and so fell upon the Spartans while in disorder; though the Lacedaemonians, the expertest and most practiced soldiers of all mankind, used to train and accustom themselves to nothing so much as to keep themselves from confusion upon any change of position, and to follow any leader, or right hand man, and form in order, and fight on what part soever dangers press. In this battle, however, Epaminondas with his phalanx, neglecting the other Greeks, and charging them alone, and Pelopidas coming up with such incredible speed and fury, so broke their courage, and baffled their art, that there began such a flight and slaughter amongst the Spartans, as was never before known. Plutarch *Pelopidas* 23

Questions?

Follow-Up Reading

- ▣ Victor Hanson 'Epameinondas, the Battle of Leuktra (371 B.C.), and the "Revolution" in Greek Battle Tactics' *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Oct., 1988), pp. 190-207 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25010887>